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The Good Grey Lady Is No. 2, and Not Really Trying Harder

By Joseph C. Goulden

In November the Evening Star *boasted of staff writer Haynes Johnson in promotional ads as "America's foremost national reporter." Its claim was more than advertising hyperbole. Johnson, at age thirty-eight, carries a byline that means something in the Washington circles that really matter. He won a Pulitzer prize for reporting the Selma racial clashes, and he has authored three well-received books— a study of black Washington that began as a* Star *series; an authoritative account of the Bay of Pigs; and a biography of Senator J. William Fulbright, the latter with Bernard Gwertzman, now in Moscow for the* New York Times.

Presidential candidates and Senators and Cabinet members answer the telephone when Haynes Johnson calls, and they read what he writes. Star *editor Newbold Noyes, recognizing Johnson as his reportorial ace, gave him commensurate treatment: to choose his own assignments; to spend, with minimal accountability, a personal travel budget; and to take periodic leaves of absence and prolonged vacations to write his books. In short, Johnson had the sort of arrangement many reporters dream about but few achieve—freedom of mobility and of expression, and an editor who left him alone to write.*

Two weeks after the promotional advertising appeared, Haynes Johnson's byline was on the front page of the Washington Post*—a switch of allegiance as startling in Washington journalism as Rogers Morton's defection to the Democrats would be in Washington politics.*

Haynes Johnson writing for the *Washington Post.* "I couldn't believe it when I read your name on the front page this morning," a former *Star* colleague wrote him. With the methodology of amateur Kremlinologists, *Star*-gazers around the city tried to plumb the significance of the shift. "Haynes got fed up with all those pro-war editorials and the conservative tone of the *Star* in general," one insider insisted. Another who claimed privity to Johnson's thinking said: "Haynes kept writing memos to Noyes telling him how to perk up the *Star*, and Noyes and some of the other brass got fed up with him. Noyes said—and this is true, because a secretary I know heard him say it—'The next time Johnson writes one of those things and tells me he has a job offer, I'm going to let him take it.'" And yet another: "This shows the *Star* has really had it, when they can't hold their top man. The linage is down, they don't give a damn about good news coverage, and Johnson was close enough to the top to see how hopeless it is."

Unfortunately for dramatic journalism, these stories fall somewhat short of the truth. That they do is in a way appropriate, for the *Star* is not a very dramatic place. It is Washington's second newspaper—and, unlike Avis, it is having considerable trouble convincing Washington that it is really trying harder. Its executives use the words "second newspaper" comfortably in their conversations, even with an outsider, and without the slightest display of expectation that they ever expect the *Star* to be anything else.

"Our goal is to make the *Star* the best *evening* newspaper in the United States, the best *conservative* paper going," a key editorial officer told me. That the *Star* is ever to be the best *Washington* newspaper—financially and in editorial heft—is something its executives tacitly concede is not to be; the *Star* has surrendered local leadership to the *Washington Post*, which is morning and liberal, and which is, as editor Noyes says, "a fantastic paper from an economic point of view."

The economic chasm between the two papers is obvious to readers who plod through the *Post*'s seemingly endless columns. Back up a few years for historical perspective, and the gap is even more spectacular.

In March 1955, when the *Post* purchased the rival morning *Washington Times-Herald* and killed everything in it except the name and some coveted columns and comics, the *Evening Star* totally dominated Washington journalism. Its forty-two million lines of advertising made it the fifth largest newspaper in the nation. The *Post*, with twenty-five million lines, barely made the top fifty list. In circulation, the *Post* ranked third behind the *Star* and *Times-Herald.*

Editorially, the *Star* had the ear of mainstream Washington, both in the local and national context. In the Eisenhower years, it found the quiet, low-voiced nirvana so long its ideal of how a nation should be run. It covered the city with blanket thoroughness down to civic association and ox roast level.

Fifteen years later the statistics have changed more than has the *Star.* The *Post* now ranks third in the nation in advertising linage (behind the *Los Angeles Times* and *Miami Herald*) with seventy million lines, while the *Star* with forty-one million lines is actually worse off than it was in 1953. The *Post* holds commanding circulation leads in both daily (487,829 to 312,146) and Sunday (641,790 to 358,754) editions.

Because of its ad linage, the *Post*'s news hole—the space available for editorial matter—often looks like Grand Canyon; the *Star*'s more like a minor cascade in Rock Creek Park. The *Post* spends around $6 million a year to support an editorial staff of 370; the *Star*, slightly more than $4 million on 260 staffers. The *Post*'s foreign desk no longer considers the *Star* a competitor. "Frankly, we pay more attention to beating the *Times*," a desk man there said. On local and national stories, *Star* reporters complain the *Post* often outmans them by two or three to one.

Influence is an immeasurable quality, but there are guidelines which suggest, if not prove, which newspaper is read, if not always heeded. An example: Be-

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